

USAID/Belarus

Annual Report

FY 2004

June 15, 2004

Please Note:

The attached RESULTS INFORMATION is from the FY 2004 Annual Report and was assembled and analyzed by the country or USAID operating unit identified on the cover page.

The Annual Report is a "pre-decisional" USAID document and does not reflect results stemming from formal USAID review(s) of this document.

Related document information can be obtained from:
USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse
8403 Colesville Road, Suite 210
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Telephone: (301) 562-0641
Fax: (301) 588-7787
Email: docorder@dec.cdie.org
Internet: <http://www.dec.org>

Portions released on or after July 1, 2004

Belarus

Performance:

Background:

Belarus gained independence in early 1990 and had a hopeful start in developing a market-based economy and democratic processes. However, for the past nine years of President Lukashenko's rule, the country has moved away from democratization, and the economy remains mired in state-controlled economic structures. The year 2003 was a year of increased attacks and serious erosion of Belarus' only nascent democratic practices. The principal impetus for this harassment appears to be the President's desire to push for a third presidential term. To lay the groundwork, the President has intensified a campaign to dampen any opposition. The March 2003 local elections were very similar to the notoriously flawed electoral process of the 2000 Parliamentary and 2001 Presidential elections. This year, the government harassed "pro-democratic" local candidates, excluded prominent opposition figures from the electoral process and prevented election monitoring. Based on false allegations, 10 of the most active human rights organizations and civil society groups were liquidated.

Political freedom continues to deeply suffer as numerous administrative and criminal measures are employed against political leaders attempting to exercise their rights. Parliamentary "Respublika" group members, constituting an alternative voice in the Parliament, are harassed through criminal investigation, violations of immunity and threats to their safety. Despite increasing pressure on political opponents, an unprecedented opposition alliance, "People's Choice Five-Plus," which includes five political parties and seeks to enlist cooperation from pro-democracy individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), was organized in November 2003 and plans to hold a parliamentary election campaign and oppose the extension of the Presidential term to a third session. A number of business associations, youth organizations, trade unions, 130 members of the National Assembly and local councils have joined the leaders of five pro-democracy political parties.

Belarusian authorities also passed a new resolution to foster a more communist-style system of propaganda, with measures to introduce specialized ideology courses at universities and posts of ideology workers at companies and institutions. The state also continues to build up the national quasi-NGOs, ensuring their special role in promoting the government policies, especially among the youth. The Belarusian Republican Union of Youth, financed directly from the budget and enjoying tax and other privileges, was recreated as a replica of the Soviet communist youth organization and acts as a counterbalance to grass-roots youth initiatives.

After a year of stalling, the Belarusian government reluctantly agreed to allow the return of the OSCE Mission, but is requiring all actions of the OSCE Mission to have the government approval. Belarus' relations with foreign governments also continued to be strained. The expulsion of two German citizens-trainers of the youth organizations for "interference in internal affairs" is among this year "incidents." Harassment of USAID-partner organizations, and rising resistance to USAID's very small yet largely "pro-democracy"-oriented program, continues and corrective steps are now under consideration. In August 2003, the government did not reregister IREX or Internews, ostensibly expelling them from the country. USAID implementing partners are denied or have difficulties in obtaining entry visas. The challenge in the coming year will be to continue to implement development activities under increasing GOB scrutiny and harassment. Given increasing prices for basic fuels, there has recently also been growing tensions in relations with Russia with little progress towards the political and economic integration envisioned in their 1999 Union Treaty. While Belarus' neighbors are developing closer EU relations, the country's policies are increasingly isolationist.

In 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) declared Belarus one of the 10 worst countries in the world in which to be a journalist. This year the authorities closed or suspended approximately half of the non-government newspapers, engaged in civil and criminal defamation suits against newspapers and seized equipment from private TV stations. A draft media law further circumscribes press freedom and would severely limit the ability of the international community to help improve media professionalism.

In its 2003 Index of Economic Freedom, the U.S.-based Heritage Foundation characterized the economy of Belarus as "repressed." It ranks Belarus 151 out of 161 countries. The country still bears the hallmarks of a communist system -- state-owned industries, collective and state farms, investment spending influenced by central fiat rather than by markets. The industrial base is deteriorating and many state firms have negative net worth, kept afloat by government subsidies and orchestrated Russian import demand. Firms have little scope to rationalize production because of mandated wage increases and restrictions on employment reduction. Existing legislation hinders private business. The hostile climate for private investment inhibits foreign investment.

The government is increasingly failing to deliver social benefits and full employment. While real wage growth is slow, the country budget for 2004 significantly cuts benefits and privileges for low-income citizens. The draft law on guaranteed social benefits strips several categories of citizens, including the disabled, Chernobyl victims and children, of such privileges as free medication, benefits derived from public transportation and communal services. HIV/AIDS is on the rise, with the country now having the second fastest growing rate of infection in the region. The current socio-economic situation is believed not to be sustainable, particularly now that the Russian government is beginning to balk at continuing important fuel subsidies.

Demographic figures are also worrisome. The annual mortality rate increased while the birth rate declined. The new National Demographic Security Program has been recently developed to slow down both annual mortality rate and the current decline in the birthrate; otherwise by 2050 it is projected that Belarus' population may contract by half.

Key Achievements:

Civil Society: The year 2003 marked the transition from USAID's pilot "rural club" program that included eight communities in Belarus towards a much broader geographic and demographic scope, to include the 10 new "public club" sites (including the urban areas). Development of a public club model as a forum to share information, discuss priorities, identify local problems and solutions, was supported by 32 grants for a total amount of \$120,000. The Community Development Foundation model was introduced to the most advanced communities and the first CDF is expected to be registered.

The Ministry of Justice and regional Departments of Justice conducted regular inspections of NGO activities. The main regional resource centers were also liquidated by the court during this spring-summer. The legal environment for NGO activities became even more unfavorable. The program worked hard to elevate the authorities' perceptions of NGO activity as something not inherently in opposition to the regime. USAID encouraged its implementing partner to involve the local government in the public club activities. In many cases, this brought positive results of higher government recognition of the NGO role in the community and more positive public image of the NGOs. In several towns, public club activities were supported by the local councils because of their contribution to the community.

A major joint program of ABA/CEELI and Counterpart International aims to strengthen civil society in Belarus through increasing legal knowledge to facilitate a community's capacity to promote proactive initiatives that engage citizens in problem-solving. A five-month public legal education pilot training program has been supported by the legal community action teams, composed of 18 legal experts from 18 communities. Community Action Team Lawyers started receiving training in substantive law relative to community development work as well as advocacy skills. The program seeks to apply this increased capacity to specifically support community development through 18 public clubs.

In 2003, Youth Leadership School continued selecting youth from throughout Belarus on a competitive

basis for two-week training in leadership skills. One-hundred-thirty-four participants were trained during this year, 76 females and 58 males. Graduates of this program have marshaled youth initiatives into officially registered NGOs. The youth alumni continue to promote youth initiatives in their communities. Such youth leaders had 50 different events in numerous communities catalyzed across the country.

Political Process: In spite of a deteriorating national landscape, some positive trends in party development this year can be directly attributed to USAID assistance. As a result of USAID's 2003 technical assistance, political party branches made a number of important strides. Belarusian party activists began to communicate with their voters more effectively. Lack of media access, the information blockade and often negative coverage by the state-run media limit them to pursuing only the door-to-door methods of voter outreach. Thus, many pro-democracy candidates using training on door knocking and message development were able to gather more than two-three times the required number of signatures for registration. Despite extreme measures the government took to prevent registration and winning of independent candidates, democratically minded political party trainees were still able to put new campaign skills into practice, capturing 53 seats in the March 2003 local elections. USAID programs trained about 30 percent of these candidates while others benefited from the TOT trainings. These are remarkable achievement in the context of the repressive Belarusian political environment.

Coalition-building has also been an ongoing component of USAID political process strengthening project since 2001. Despite all government pressures on political opponents, the coalition of 2001 and again of 2003, consisting of the BPF, UCP, BDSH, BCP and Labor parties has continued existence for the purposes of the 2004 parliamentary elections. The coalition's platform that USAID helped to develop contains common political, social and economic goals towards which pro-reform candidates, if elected, will strive. Parties' campaigning together on a platform of common goals is a significant step forward in the political development of the country. Furthermore, the coalition seeks to enlist cooperation from pro-democracy individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A number of business associations, youth organizations and several trade unions also joined leaders of five pro-democracy political parties who launched this campaign. One hundred and thirty members of the National Assembly and local soviets have also expressed their intent to support the alliance.

Independent Media Development: With the state media holding large advantages in access, funding and support, the independent media faces an on-going battle in its drive to penetrate the information blockade. At this moment, the following current conditions are illustrative of increasing public recognition of independent media's role: since 1998, the level of public trust to independent media has reportedly more than doubled and currently reaches 43.8 percent compared to 19.6 percent at the beginning of 1998. With USAID support, the newspapers have provided more well-balanced professional coverage of issues of interest. In May 2003, the second distance learning project for journalists from independent papers was also completed. The project significantly increased the quality of reporting on such topics as national and regional economic issues, every-day issues of interest, and provided high-quality editorial guidance to Belarusian journalists. The fact that in many regional towns independent papers still significantly outsell the local state papers can be attributable to improved journalism and management. Over the past two years, USAID assisted 25 newspapers in developing alternative methods of distribution; ten of these papers have developed significant alternative systems. Unfortunately, their successes also led to the clampdown on the independent publications.

Rule of Law: Since 2000, USAID has been working in Belarus with the objective to increase access to justice for Belarusian citizens. Over 20 Legal Advice Centers (LACs) are now operated by three Belarusian partners. The LACs provide citizens with qualified legal advice and conducted this year 116 public legal education seminars for 3,623 people. The Legal Information Clearinghouse established in 2001 by ABA/CEELI and a local NGO Independent Society for Legal Research (ISLR), provided 911 direct consultations to NGOs and NGO lawyers produced and distributed 19 electronic newsletters to a distribution list of more than 30 lawyers and 12 NGOs. It also researched and drafted 20 analytical/monitoring memos on changes in legislation with comments which were distributed to 42 NGO lawyers. LAC lawyers provided 6,068 consultations on substantive and procedural legal matters and filed 407 on behalf of their clients.

In 2003, the institution building project aimed at strengthening NGOs' effectiveness also brought impressive results. A recent development is the increased commitment and skills to initiate and maintain long term and sustainable partnerships. The Belarusian Organization of Working Women reported in October 2003 that, in addition to the regular legal updates that the Independent Society for Legal Research normally sends them, the ISLR has also forwarded them valuable legal information concerning household communal services reform. This information enhanced the organization's ability to conduct current public legal education seminars on housing law reform. This sharing of legal information is an example of improved networking between the two groups and greater knowledge of each other's programs and needs.

Gender: USAID activities in Belarus provided equal assistance to both men and women. A women's leadership training component has been specifically developed and implemented for both CSO and political process activities. Women's NGOs and initiatives receive USAID technical and financial support in identifying and educating new leaders, coordinating activities during national campaigns. A seven-month anti-trafficking activity was launched to reduce trafficking of Belarusian women by developing their job-market skills and by providing vulnerable women with economic opportunities in selected regions.

Eurasia Foundation: Consistent with USAID's focus on fostering local community development, Eurasia supported this year a public association "Women for Restoration of Naroch Region" to sustain a favorable environment for development of rural tourism for local economic development. Another grant to an association "Agro- and Ecotourism" enhances the business environment for development of sustainable rural tourism in Belarus by drafting laws and regulations to remove impediments to the sector and facilitate the development of rural tourism.

Farmer-to-Farmer Program: The Citizens Network for Foreign Affairs Inc. (CNFA) is administering a regional activity in Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. The activity contributes to the development of local communities. The program's objectives are to strengthen the ability of private farmer associations to improve the incomes and businesses of their members, to develop private agribusinesses and to stimulate the development of entrepreneurial initiatives in the agricultural sector. In 2003, CNFA Belarus completed 16 volunteer assignments within six projects during FY03. The volunteers provide about three weeks of their time, and bring skills developed in the competitive agricultural market to private farmers, agricultural cooperatives and associations. As a result of the assistance provided, incomes increased for 219 people (767 counting family members).

Country Close and Graduation:

Results Framework

113-0210 Increased Citizen Participation in Democratic Practices

SO Level Indicator(s):

Citizens participating in civil society organizations' activities and civic initiatives

2.1.1 Increased effectiveness of democratically oriented NGOs

2.1.2 Increased responsiveness of political parties to public needs

2.1.3 Enhanced public access to objective and substantive information